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Commentary...

The North Hill: Expansion Without Preservation?

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(Open Space and Recreation Committee)

Last year, the Open Space and Recreation Committee strongly opposed expansion of the North Hill Golf Course. This year, responding to what seemed to be the selectmen's spirit of compromise, the Committee voted to trade its opposition in return for preservation of that portion of the North Hill area deemed most environmentally and historically sensitive. The selectmen have disappointed us, however. In spite of what we thought was an understanding that the article for the golf course would request both expansion and preservation, they have written Article 11 to request funding for the project without a request that the specific land also be set aside.

The committee is especially concerned about an 80-acre parcel that abuts Mayflower St. and continues North and West. It includes the wetlands and also, the steep slopes down to the wetlands which if eroded, could lead to wetland damage. This land also acts as a buffer to the North Hill Marsh Pond and, it is an area in which endangered species might have their habitats. Finally, it is of unique historical significance because it contains a portion of the Green Harbor Path, a trail layed out in the 1620s for travel from Plymouth to Scituate. The only other extant section of this very old path is in Marshfield. The Committee felt, and the North Hill Expansion Committee apparently agrees, that this trail should definitely be preserved. The Open Space and Recreation Committee thus needed to find a vehicle to address these concerns if it was to compromise and support expansion on the remaining 220 acres.

In November and December, the Committee welcomed first 2 selectmen and then, the chairman alone, at our monthly meetings. The message the selectmen delivered was concern that the expansion be handled in an environmentally sensitive way and a desire for compromise so that all of us might get a least part of what we wanted. At our December meeting, we were particularly pleased with the chairman's interest in fashioning an agreement that would be tolerable to all parties. To ensure our Committee's full support for expansion at Town Meeting, the selectmen were adamant that the requests for expansion and preservation be part of the same article. Some of our members however, also wanted a second article that would separately approve the 80-acre parcel should voters reject golf course funding.

To iron out these differences, 3 members of our Committee attended the Jan. 4 selectmen's meeting to further discuss a proposed joint article. Although the official minutes of that meeting lack detail, only summarizing what ensued as "a long discussion," Committee members who attended recall having come to an understanding that a single article would request

approval for both expansion and preservation. However, the selectmen refused to support another separate article requesting preservation alone so that if the golf course didn't pass, some of the land could still be saved from future development. To protect the environmental interests and mindful of last year's Town Meeting defeat of expansion, one of our members presented a Citizen's Petition asking, according to the official minutes, that the Conservation Commission "take control of the wetlands if the expansion article for North Hill is rejected at Town Meeting."

Now, the articles are published and we are dismayed to find that Article 11 which requests funding for expansion, totally ignores the Committee's concerns about sensitive and historical areas of the North Hill parcel. Fortunately, the Article 12 Citizen's Petition separately requests preservation of that portion of the land.

At this point, the only way the Open Space and Recreation Committee can support expansion is if Article 11 is amended prior to Town Meeting so that it includes protection of these most sensitive 80 acres.